

TUTORIAL
4.5

What is Culture?

This tutorial introduces the basic concept of 'culture', and discusses what it is.

Introduction

We are going to begin by defining a few terms and considering some of the key processes and concepts embodied by the word, "culture." Before we look at any culture in particular, it is helpful to understand what culture in general is, and how it works. We are going to focus on the relationship between the invisible aspects of culture; the underlying values and assumptions of a society, and culture that can be seen; the specific behaviors that derive from those values. In other words, how does what people think effect how they act?

It is important to understand that what people do and say in a particular culture is not just arbitrary and spontaneous, but it is consistent with what people in that culture value and believe in. By knowing people's values and beliefs, you can come to expect and predict their behavior.

Once people are no longer catching you off guard with their actions, and once you are no longer simply reacting to their behavior, you are well on your way to successful cultural adjustment. Once you accept that people behave the way they do for a reason - whatever you may think of that reason - you can go beyond simply reacting to that behavior and figure out how to work with it. Knowing where behavior is coming from doesn't mean that you have to like or accept it, but it should mean that you're no longer surprised by it - and that's a big step toward successful interaction.

Cultural Assumptions

Imagine that you have been invited to a meal in your neighbor's home. You would probably feel confident that you know how to behave politely in that situation. Your mother probably taught you as a child what was expected of you, and your behavior has been refined since then by many experiences of dining with others. You know to do things like greeting your host politely, asking where you should sit at the dining table, holding your knife and fork

correctly...etc. You probably don't even think about those kinds of things any more. But what if your neighbors had recently come to your country from Senegal? There are many points of etiquette that a Senegalese person knows constitute polite behavior that you might not know. These are the things that their parents would have taught them or that have been modeled for them that they don't even think about anymore.

For example, in a Senegalese visiting and dining situation you should begin by greeting the family and taking time to ask about the health and welfare of family members. You should wait to be shown to your seat, and not just sit down wherever you want, because seating is often a matter of hierarchy. The meal might be served on the floor or a low table, so you should sit cross-legged, trying not let your feet touch the food mat. You shouldn't start to eat until the oldest male starts to eat. Food is often served from a communal bowl, and you should eat from the section of the bowl in front of you and you would never reach across the bowl to get something from the other side. And eat only with your right hand. Your hosts will urge you to take second helpings, and you should always sample each dish that is offered. Leave a little food on your plate or in your section of the communal bowl, because this shows that you have had enough to eat and that your hosts have looked after you well. And, people usually stay for at least half an hour after eating, to talk and show that the personal relationship with your hosts is important to you.

So, even though you might very much want to be polite and show respect to your neighbors, there is a real risk of you acting in a way that might seem to them to be very impolite, and possibly even annoying or offensive. If you don't know what is "polite" and "respectful", you can't communicate that to your neighbors, even with the best intentions.

That people from two different cultures can view the same behavior differently is precisely what makes cross-cultural encounters so challenging and problematic.

The Iceberg

Culture has been compared to an iceberg. Part of the iceberg is visible - above the waterline - but there is a larger, invisible section below the water line.

Culture has some aspects that are observable. These are the things people do and say - their behavior. But there are other aspects of culture that can only be suspected, imagined, or worked out by instinct. So, like an iceberg, the part of culture that we can observe is only a small part of a much bigger whole. The aspects of culture that might be described as being 'below the waterline' are things that have to do with values, beliefs, thoughts and opinions.

Below is a list of some common features of culture. Rewrite the list, dividing it into two sections - things you consider to be above the waterline (observable behavior), and those things that are not observable.

- facial expressions
- religious beliefs
- religious rituals
- the importance of time
- paintings
- values
- literature
- child raising beliefs
- what leadership means
- gestures
- festivals and holidays
- the concept of justice
- what friendship means
- what is modest or immodest
- popular foods
- common eating habits
- education standards
- understanding of the natural world
- the concept of self
- the accepted work ethic
- what is considered beautiful
- music
- types of dress
- general worldview
- view of personal space
- rules of social etiquette

Suggested answers for this exercise are at the end of the tutorial.

You might notice that there is a relationship between observable behavior - things that appear above the waterline - and those things that are not observable. In most cases, the invisible aspects of culture influence or cause the visible ones. For example, religious beliefs often motivate the form of festivals, holidays or rituals. Rules of social etiquette influence common eating habits, and child raising beliefs and the accepted work ethic, influence education.

If your desire is to learn to communicate clearly cross-culturally, it is important to take the necessary time to learn to understand those deeper, hidden things that are below the surface of observable behavior.

Linking Values to Behavior

We saw how some aspects of culture show up in people's behavior, and that many other aspects of culture are invisible - such as thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. We saw that these two areas, the visible and the hidden, are actually related to each other, and that the values and beliefs that can't be seen are what influence behavior.

If you want to understand where behavior comes from - to understand *why* people behave the way they do - then you will have to learn about values and beliefs. The behavior of people from another culture may seem strange to you, but it probably makes sense to them, and vice versa. Our behavior makes sense to us because it is consistent with what we believe or what we think is worthwhile. When we say that what someone has done "makes no sense," what we mean is that their action contradicts what we believe that person really feels or wants.

In the table below, we have listed a certain behavior, and then described a value or belief that might have motivated that behavior. After you have read through this list once, read through it again and think of other specific behaviors that might be prompted by each of the values or beliefs listed.

Behavior	Value or Belief
At a meeting, agreeing with a suggestion you actually think is wrong.	Saving face
Not helping the person next to you on an exam.	Self-reliance
Taking a day off school to attend the wedding of a cousin.	Centrality of family
Keeping on an older member of staff whose performance is weak.	Respect for age
Asking a question to bring out your opinion rather than disagreeing openly.	Indirectness
Asking the boss for his opinion about something that you're an expert in.	Deference to authority
Inviting the cleaning staff to eat lunch with everyone else in your office.	Egalitarianism
Asking people to call you by your first name.	Informality
Disagreeing openly with someone at a meeting.	Directness
Accepting, without question, that something can't be changed.	External Control

Universal, Cultural or Personal?

All of us have preferences, thoughts about things and certain ways of doing things. Some of these are universal to all people, some are dictated by our culture, and some are just our own personal preferences. So we can say that culture is only one dimension of human behavior. To understand what culture is, it is important to see it in relation to the other two dimensions - the universal and the personal. Let's define them and look at some examples:

Universal refers to ways in which all people in all groups are the same. Some examples:

- Being careful when crossing the road.
- Sleeping regularly.
- Regretting being the cause of an injury to another person.
- Feeling sad at the death of a mother or father.
- Getting food and preparing it.

Cultural refers to what a particular group of people have in common with each other and how they are different from every other group. Some examples:

- Considering snakes to be sacred.
- Waiting in a queue.
- Respecting older people.
- Eating with chopsticks.
- Being welcoming to strangers.
- Pointing with the bottom lip.
- Smearing ashes on your face in respect of a death.

Personal describes the ways in which each one of us is different from everyone else, including those in our group. Some examples:

- Sleeping with the window open.
- Liking spicy food.
- Preferring playing soccer to reading a book.
- Not liking large social gatherings.

There are two important things for you to remember:

1. Because of universal behavior, not everything about people in a new culture is going to be different: some of what you already know about human behavior is going to apply in another culture.

2. Because of personal behavior, not everything you learn about another culture is going to apply in equal measure, or at all, to every individual in that culture.

For example, I lived with my family for many years in a small, isolated village in Papua New Guinea. We lived among the people and learned their language and culture. One of the differences in culture we recognized almost immediately was in the area of “privacy”. As westerners, we highly valued privacy in our family and personal life - even considering that we had a ‘personal life’ was evidence of our view of privacy. Although we enjoyed spending a lot of time with the local people, we liked to choose when that time would be. We also liked (or *needed*) some time when we were just on our own.

Most of our friends in the village did not consider personal privacy in many areas of life to be something to be valued or sought after. Many had not even thought much about it before. However, one local family saw how we lived, and noticed that we valued times when we were alone as a family. They expressed empathy for our feelings about privacy and said that they also liked to have some time alone as a family, and that always being with other people was stressful to them. They said that they liked to keep the inside of their home a ‘private place’ and that they didn’t enjoy people just walking in unannounced. This was a surprise to us, because we assumed that everyone in the village thought about privacy in the same way. In time, as we became closer to people and got to know them on a deeper level, we identified many areas of ‘culture’ - common behaviors and beliefs that most people in the group shared. But we also noticed many cases of personal preference as well. Even in that isolated, very homogenous cultural situation, there were other cases of people who did not always follow the cultural norms.



DISCUSSION POINTS

What is Culture?

1. Most people do not naturally look at their own culture objectively, but rather act within their culture without considering why they do things. Why do you think that is?
2. What would you say are some of the most formative influences on your own country’s cultural values - where did they come from?



ACTIVITIES

What is Culture?

1. The differences between universal, cultural, and personal behaviors occur in all cultures. Try to find examples of each in your local situation. Spend some time in a public community place observing people and note four examples of each category of behavior that you observed. For personal behaviors, you may find it easier observing people you know well, such as people at your work, church or among your family and friends.



ANSWERS

What is Culture?

The Iceberg:

These are aspect of culture that are visible - above the waterline:

facial expressions, religious rituals, paintings, literature, gestures, festivals and holidays, popular foods, common eating habits, education standards, music, types of dress, rules of social etiquette.

These items are in the invisible part:

religious beliefs, the importance of time, values, child raising beliefs, what leadership means, the concept of justice, what friendship means, what is modest or immodest, understanding of the natural world, the concept of self, the accepted work ethic, what is considered beautiful, general worldview, view of personal space.